FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
December 2, 2001

HOPE FOR THE LONG HAUL
John M. Buchanan

There is a genuine spiritual hunger loose in the world, among the advantaged as well as among the disadvantaged. It is found in the most elegant penthouses in Manhattan. It is found in the barrios of Managua. People hunger for release from oppression, boredom, and lifelessness. These malaises are sometimes the result of having too little, and sometimes the result of having too much.... It is not just spiritual hunger that is loose in the world, however. That for which the human spirit hungers is also loose in the world. At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that the human spirit is unsatisfied with anything short of God.... The Spirit of the triune God is and always will be the life force of the world and all that is good and hopeful in it, which includes the hunger for God.

Joanna Adams
Hope as the Intractable Resolve of the Spirit

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

HOPE FOR THE LONG HAUL
DECEMBER 2, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 122

Scripture
Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your word. As we begin again this advent journey of waiting and expecting and hoping, be with us — speak your word of hope to us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

As a rule the preacher should not use his or her children as sermon illustrations. It can be exploitive and embarrassing. And when it is simply irresistible, one should only refer to one's family rarely, respectfully and cautiously. No such rule exists for grandchildren, however. When it comes to grandchildren, ordinarily reticent, respectfully people become shameless. I got so tired of admiring pictures of my friends' grandchildren that when I finally had one of my own, I took her picture into the pulpit and made the whole congregation admire her. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church, Clifton Kirkpatrick, had his first grandchild two years ago and has referred to her and told stores about her in every single public speech he has made since and Cliff makes 3 or 4 speeches a day. I heard him do it recently and afterwards suggested that since his grandchild wasn't a new baby anymore maybe he could let up a little bit. "Why," he said, "she's new to me and besides she's the most wonderful child on the face of the earth and I see it as my duty to keep on telling people about her." All of which is to set you up for a grandchild story, but it is also a First Sunday in Advent story.

Rachel goes to school at a parochial school, Cardinal Bernadin School, because it provides a wonderful special program for her. She loves it, the school and teachers and her classmates love her. Last year, at just this time, as she was being tucked in for the night, her mother asked her if she had learned any new songs and Rachel sang in the dark from her bed:

> Stay awake (clap-clap)
> Be ready (clap-clap)
> The Lord is coming soon
> Alleluia! Alleluia! (*hands waving in the air, a little like a Bear's wide receiver after scoring the winning touchdown*)
> The Lord is coming soon (clap-clap)

She loves to sing it, and will sing it at a drop of a hat, and we love it too, and the result is that with Rachel and her sweet song — its Advent all year long.

Stay awake
Be ready
The Lord is coming soon
Alleluia! Alleluia!
The Lord is coming soon.

The Church of Jesus Christ, for centuries, has held to the peculiar notion that real time begins today, on the first Sunday of Advent — four Sundays before Christmas. We call the rest of the year "Ordinary Time." Today something new begins. And it's not just new for those of us who know about it and name it, and sing hymns about it, and celebrate it with candles and the color purple. It's for the world, for human history. "In this season we are at the brink of something utterly new, long yearned for, but beyond our capacity to enact." [See Texts for Preaching, Year A]

Advent is about hope, rooted in something new God did in human history two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, and at the same time, looking ahead to the future in which God will continue to act lovingly, creatively, redemptively. The world, by the way, is impatient to get on with Christmas, to recall the story briefly and then to be immersed in the year-end festivities — which, this year, have taken on an aura of patriotic duty. But the church, in its liturgies and hymnody and scripture — invites us to pause, to sit in the darkness for a while before the light is here in all its beauty and brightness; to look both backward into history and into our personal histories, and forward to the human future and our personal futures, and to prepare for the newness of God's gift of love.

Advent is about hope and it comes at a moment when the world desperately needs a reason to be hopeful.

Even before September 11th, there was emerging in American culture something of a crisis of hope. Andrew Delbanco, Columbia University professor, wrote a highly acclaimed book, *The Real American Dream, A Meditation on Hope*, in which he argued that, "Our hopes are a measure of our greatness. When they shrink, we ourselves are diminished." Professor Delbanco thinks that our hopes have diminished a lot in recent years. He says that in the early days, the New England Puritans set their hope in God. In the 19th century, America placed hope in the nation "the last best hope of mankind," Abraham Lincoln put it. But in the late 20th century, America's hope began to be focused on the self. He writes, "The story of American hope over the past two centuries is one of increasing narrowing." The late 20th century, he says, "conspired to install instant gratification as the hallmark of hope of the good life. By the time the horizon of hope had shrunk to the scale of self-pampering."

The theologian Douglas John Hall, a Canadian, is one of the most thoughtful analysts of contemporary North American culture thinks that a pervasive loss of hope — what he calls a covert despair is the spiritual hallmark of our time.

Both Delbanco and Hall agree that the evidence of our condition is consistent with what psychology knows about hopelessness and how people without hope behave — namely either destructively or selfishly. We know more about the violent destructiveness that comes from

hopelessness than we want to. We know how desperate and hopeless poverty breeds mindless violence. We have experienced it in attacks on our nation. And this morning Israel reels again in the aftermath of suicide bombings related directly to a situation of political hopelessness. The other manifestation of hopelessness, Delbanco and Hall agree, is the desperate search to fulfill the spiritual empty place where hope use to be, with acquisitions, material goods, stuff. I was reminded of the news photos and television pictures, last Friday morning, the day after Thanksgiving — of crowds of people, lined up outside shopping malls at 4:00 am, and when the doors opened — charging into the stores with an almost religious zeal and grim determination.

And against that backdrop, which intensified this year, it seems, comes the Christian faith and the Christian Church with its peculiar hopefulness. It is a persistent and resilient hope. And it is very old. All over the Christian world today congregations are reading and hearing the ancient vision of the prophet Isaiah — about a time when there will be peace in Jerusalem, particularly poignant this morning…

> "When nations will stream to the mountain of God.
> When justice will reign and therefore swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and nations shall not lift up sword against nation…

As a matter of fact, when those words were written, Jerusalem was a marginal and grimy operation. And future prospects for Israel were anything but peaceful. So was he mad? Are we mad or merely irrelevant to be invoking images of peace at this unique moment in time?

I would propose that nothing is more essential to the spiritual well being of our nation than the articulation of that hope, even as we go about the necessary business of confronting terrorism. I would propose that the resiliency of our ancient hope is precisely the faith that God continues to break into human history, and that God's alternative vision of weapons turned into agricultural implements, of battlefields transformed into fertile wheat fields, is absolutely necessary for our survival.

It reminds me of a story Fourth Church member and Elder Ann Petersen told me. Ann was serving in the Pentagon as General Counsel for the Air Force and was present at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona when we began to implement the Arms Reduction Treaty with the Soviet Union. Ground launched cruise missiles and their mobile lauchers were laid out on the tarmac and literally cut into pieces in the presence of American and Soviet inspectors and then the pieces were carefully spread out on the tarmac so that Soviet surveillance satellites could see and verify. Ann also recalled seeing in the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the treaty, Soviet titanium missile shells, now decommissioned, being used as farm silos — a literal example of swords transformed into plowshares.

So yes, Advent hope is real hope, serious hope. And yes, sometime it is remote, so remote that it feels unreal, almost silly. But down across the centuries, God's people have held tightly to that hope and it has given them resiliency and courage and life itself, even in the darkest and most hopeless situation.

We need that hope today, perhaps as never before. Bob Cathey who teaches theology at McCormick Seminary spoke to our officers and told about phoning Walter Payton High School, just a few blocks west of here, on September 11th, where his daughter Laura is a 9th grader. Then he drove downtown to pick her up. Cathey says the sight of downtown Chicago emptying out at 10:15 in the morning recalled images from his worst Cold War nightmares. His daughter Laura told him that she was in English class when the school announced what was happening. From her classroom she could see the Sears Tower. She said that she would glance out every few minutes just to be sure that it was still there.

We need the hopeful vision of Advent as never before.

Be ready Jesus said. Stay awake and alert because you don't know when God will show up. No one, after all, expected God to come in a humble birth in the out-of-the-way little town of Bethlehem. Nobody much recognized God's presence in Jesus, later, as he taught and healed and confronted and challenged. And even fewer, about nobody in fact, recognized God, as he was betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. Be ready and awake and alert because no one knows how and when God will appear. What we believe and trust is that God will come, that God is an active participant in human history and our personal histories. We don't know how or when — but we trust that God will come again into our lives with love and forgiveness and reconciliation and healing. That's what hope is — that's what Advent is about.

A young friend of mine, a college freshman, a fine athlete, came home for Thanksgiving with a sad duty to perform. A high school friend who had battled cancer for years had finally died and he was going to speak at her funeral.

Staunton chose some words about hope, very personal hope, from his favorite movie *The Shawshank Redemption.* Red, played by Morgan Freeman, reflects about his friend who has recently dug a tunnel out of the prison where they are incarcerated and is heading for Mexico —

> "Some birds aren't meant to be caged. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope I can see my friend and shake his hand. Hope is a good thing. Maybe the best of things. And no good things ever dies."

And Emily Dickinson —

> Hope is the thing with feathers
> that perches in the soul
> and sings the tune without words
> and never stops at all.

And Rachel's sweet Advent song — we probably couldn't sing it. But we could say it, together, because this is our hope, the hope we share in Jesus Christ.

And it might even be okay to punctuate it with very un-Presbyterian hand claps and hand waves.

So if you're feeling brave, and in the spirit of Advent's beautiful and resilient hope — if you are willing to throw caution to the wind, please join me:

Stay Awake (clap-clap)
Be Ready (clap-clap)
The Lord is Coming Soon.
Alleluia! Alleluia! (hand wave)
The Lord is Coming Soon! (clap-clap)

Amen.